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TO: School Food Authorities (SFAs)

FROM: Christine Emerson, School Nutrition Programs Director

SUBJECT: Incorporating the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans into School Meals

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is currently in the process of revising the school meal patterns and nutrition standards. It is recommended that School Food Authorities (SFAs) begin proactively implementing the applicable recommendations of the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) within the current meal pattern requirements and nutrition standards. Gradual implementation provides an opportunity for students to develop a taste for new items and/or modified recipes.

Progressive implementation of the following recommendations should be undertaken by all SFAs, regardless of the menu planning approach being used.

WHOLE GRAINS

- SFAs should increase the amount and variety of whole grain products offered to students, and progress toward the goal of making half of all grains offered and served, whole grains. The consumption of whole grains is strongly encouraged in the 2005 DGAs; one of the key recommendations states, "In general, at least half of the grains should come from whole grains." The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), in draft industry guidance released after the publication of the 2005 DGAs, has defined whole grains as, "cereal grains that consist of the intact, ground, cracked or flaked caryopsis [kernel], whose principal anatomical components - the starchy endosperm, germ and bran - are present in the same relative proportions as they exist in the intact caryopsis." According to the 2005 DGAs, the whole grain should be the first item listed in the ingredient statement in order for a product to be considered a whole grain; for many whole grain products, the words "whole" or "whole grain" appear before the grain ingredient's name in the ingredient statement.

FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

- SFAs should increase the availability and service of both fruits and vegetables within the school meals programs.
- In the NSLP, SFAs should provide meals that offer both a fruit and a vegetable, regardless of the menu planning approach being used. One of the key recommendations in the 2005 DGAs is to, "Choose a variety of fruits and vegetables each day. In particular, select from all five vegetable subgroups (dark green, orange, legumes, starchy vegetables, and other vegetables) several times a week." Fruits and vegetables, as well as vegetable subgroups, offer somewhat different combinations of nutrients; thus, consuming a variety of each is important for a well-balanced diet.

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MILK

- SFAs should offer only low-fat (1% or less) and fat-free milk in the school meal programs for all children above the age of two. The 2005 DGAs include a recommendation to consume fat-free and low-fat milk and milk products on a daily basis, with a key recommendation stating, “Consume three cups per day of fat-free or low-fat milk or equivalent milk products. Children two to eight years should consume two cups per day of fat-free or low-fat milk or equivalent products.” Statutory requirements necessitate offering fluid milk in a variety of fat contents in the NSLP; this requirement can be met by offering both low-fat and fat-free milk. Higher fat milks are unwarranted for children older than two.

SODIUM

- SFAs should begin reducing sodium incrementally, with a long-term, step-wise plan for meeting the DGAs recommendation. The current DGA recommendation is substantially lower than the average American’s daily intake. Since sodium is a common preservative, as well as a distinct flavor enhancer, successfully shifting the American palate toward no more than 2,300 mg per day will require a concerted effort across all food systems. SAs should strongly encourage SFAs to establish and commit to a plan that would reduce the sodium levels in school meals incrementally; a gradual, long term approach to meet the DGAs recommendations will allow students’ palates and the product marketplace the necessary time to adjust.

FIBER

- SFAs should plan meals that provide fiber at levels appropriate for each age/grade group that reflect the 2005 DGAs recommendation. “The recommended dietary fiber intake is 14 grams per 1,000 calories consumed.” Even SFAs that have been meeting recommended benchmarks for fiber over the past few years will likely need to increase fiber to meet the DGA level. Fiber is found naturally in fruits, vegetables (particularly legumes) and whole grains; these food groups can be significantly, but gradually, increased in school meals. Gradual increases now will allow students’ palates to adjust and will make the transition to a numeric fiber target easier. Fruits can be served without the addition of salt, butter or sauces; the addition of whole fruits as a choice in school menus will increase fiber while reducing sodium.

CHOLESTEROL

- SFAs should plan meals that, on average over a school week, provide less than 100 mg of cholesterol at lunch and less than 75 mg of cholesterol at breakfast for all age/grade groups. A key recommendation of the 2005 DGAs, is to consume “less than 300 mg/day of cholesterol.”

TRANS FATS

- SFAs should plan meals that minimize trans fats. The 2005s DGAs represent the first discussion of trans fats in national nutrition policy. A key recommendation of the document includes, “keep trans fatty acid consumption as low as possible.” Be cognizant of trans fats in all foods that are offered/served and to work toward minimizing these unhealthy fats.

If you have questions, please contact School Nutrition Programs at (406) 444-2501.

Source citation: U.S. Department of Agriculture Memo SP 04-2008.